

At his town hall meeting Tuesday in Omaha, Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., didn't have much good to say about the health care legislation under consideration in Congress.

It costs too much, he said. It sets up a government-run plan that, in his view, would unfairly compete with private insurers. And all those allegations about funding abortion or creating "death panels" -- well, they're not exactly in the bill, he acknowledged.

But, he said, you never know what might happen.

Those comments played well with most of the 725 people who attended the meeting at Millard North High School, 144th and Pacific Streets. The suburban setting drew many people clearly hostile to an expanded government role in health care.

"I love my country, but I fear my government," one man declared to loud applause. "Keep out of my life."

In an interview, however, Terry didn't close the door on supporting some form of health legislation this year, as long as it differs sharply from the version that passed the House Energy and Commerce Committee before the August recess.

Terry, a member of the committee, voted against the bill.

He said he hopes Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, is able to negotiate a compromise version in the Senate.

"There's a 50-50 chance that some compromise will come out that will get conservative votes," he said.

If not, Terry said, he's fine with seeking re-election in 2010 as an incumbent who helped thwart health care legislation.

"If they refuse to compromise, then who's killing the bill?"

During the town hall meeting, more than 50 people asked questions. Some were impassioned as they expressed fears about health care reform.

Terry, who represents Nebraska's 2nd Congressional District, said it's not surprising that people feel strongly about the issue.

"Health care is very personal," he said. "You're talking about your own health, your children's health."

Some of those at the meeting called for a more activist solution to rising health care costs and the millions of people who lack coverage.

Don Kuhns, an auto mechanic, described steep increases in insurance premiums and rising deductibles at his employer and said the government could play a role in making health care more affordable and fair.

"We're not dealing with insurance companies any more," he said. "We're dealing with insurance monopolies."

Another person asked why, if Terry believes the House bill is "dead on arrival" in the Senate, he spent so much time talking about its flaws instead of describing a more acceptable alternative.

Terry said his own idea, which the committee rejected, was to allow uninsured individuals to join the program used by federal employees, including members of Congress. That program includes a choice of many different private insurance plans.

Those who join the federal benefits program under Terry's proposal would be responsible for their own premiums, although some government subsidies would be provided.

The key thing for him, Terry said, is to prevent a government-subsidized plan from being one of the options for expanding health coverage. Over time, he said, it inevitably would pull employers away from private insurers and lead to a single-payer, national system.

"I'm a limited government guy," he said in an interview. "That's something I can't violate."

Contact the writer:

444-1114, paul.goodsell@owh.com

